How September 11 changed American foreign policy: the record a year later

Rudolf, Peter

Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version
Stellungnahme / comment

Zur Verfügung gestellt in Kooperation mit / provided in cooperation with:
Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (SWP)

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:
Rudolf, P. (2002). *How September 11 changed American foreign policy: the record a year later.* (SWP Comment, 01/2002). Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik -SWP- Deutsches Institut für Internationale Politik und Sicherheit.
https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0168-ssoar-399537

SWP Comments

Stiftung
Wissenschaft und
Politik

German Institute
for International and
Security Affairs

How September 11 Changed American Foreign Policy

The Record a Year Later

Peter Rudolf

September 11 presented the Bush administration with the opportunity for a strategic reorientation of American foreign policy. Contrary to the hopes of many, however, this chance was not used to move towards a more multilateral policy, rather it was used to mobilize resources to the benefit of a superpower policy with a strong emphasis on military might. In light of increased perception of asymmetrical threats and with the "War on Terrorism" as legitimizing principle, those who advocate a policy based on superior military power and unrestricted room to maneuver have succeeded in dominating the foreign policy discourse in the US. The more such thinking determines the policy of the Bush administration – and in many areas it has already shaped decisions – the more this will lead to strategic divergence between the US and Europe.

There have been no signs following September 11 of a paradigm shift towards a multilateral approach with respect the controversial issues that have led to the impression of a unilateral American foreign policy. On the contrary: strategic independence in the realm of security policy has become the guiding principle. This was shown quite clearly by the decision to withdraw from the ABM treaty in December 2001 and especially through the categorical rejection of efforts to strengthen the Biological Weapons Convention at the Fifth Review Conference in November and December 2001. In contrast to Europe, multilateral arms control as an instrument of non-proliferation is viewed as useless, even harmful. According to American conservatives, arms control agreements serve to tie the hands of the US, but do not stop determined "rogue states" from developing weapons of mass destruction. And in light of an increasingly interventionist policy as part of the "War on Terrorism", American opposition to the International Criminal Court has stiffened.

The Neoconservative Network Gains Ground

The challenge posed by transnational terrorism revealed the limits of the Bush administration's early views on geopolitical power relations. The primacy of the fight

against terrorism made it necessary to collaborate with other states, and, as such, to make tactical concessions. While the necessity of international cooperation has been accepted, this has not resulted in any clear consequences for grand strategy. A basic preference for a multilateral approach as still advocated by liberal internationalists – which does not exclude going it alone in certain cases – is less and less discernable.

The logic of the "American System" (G. John Ikenberry), an institutionalized form of benevolent hegemony, nevertheless demands a certain measure of readiness to act multilaterally. This system enables other states to bring their interests and perspectives to bear. That also demands from the American side the willingness to subject itself to the rules of multilateral institutions and to participate in the creation and further development of such structures, instead of viewing international institutions as useful only when they provide international legitimacy and reduce the costs to the US for its foreign policy operations.

In considering how a coalition for the war on terrorism might take long-term institutional form without limiting the flexibility to act unilaterally, the State Department has followed the traditional logic of American foreign policy since 1945. It is, however, unlikely that these internal deliberations will develop into proposals for the establishment of a new international institution.

This is in part due to the continuing loss of influence of the moderate wing of the Republican party since September 11. The wing of the Republican Party committed to "military strength and moral clarity" has taken advantage of the current situation to strengthen its position vis-à-vis the more traditional, realist faction.

The dividing line that runs through the administration clearly delineates two ideological camps. On one side are those who became known in the seventies and eighties as neoconservatives. This group combines a skepticism of multilateral commitments and any constraints placed on American power with the belief in American exceptionalism and a special international role for the United States. On the other side is the Republican party's traditional realist wing of moderate conservatives. This group considers international institutions and alliance partners quite useful although mostly in an instrumental sense.

President Bush's view of American policy follows closely that of the neoconservatives who advocate an almost imperial foreign policy. This influence is most clearly evident in the concrete case of American Middle East policy. Bush has given up any pretense of playing the role of an even-handed mediator and has opted instead to grant nearly unconditional support for Israeli policy. This, of course, is also driven by domestic political calculations. Bush is trying to win favor with Jewish voters, the vast majority of whom traditionally vote for the Democrats. Moreover, this change of course is the result of structural changes within the Republican party. Evangelical fundamentalists within the party have formed a strong pro-Israel lobby. There are two explanations for this support. Some are convinced that Israel has a biblical claim to the occupied territories. Others believe that the return of Jesus Christ and the establishment of his thousand-year reign on earth depends on the existence of a Jewish state and its control of Jerusalem. With the outbreak of the second Intifada this appeared to be in danger. Support for Israel thus became one of the central concerns of religious conservatives, who, particularly in the South, represent a strong core of the Republican Party. According to estimates by Karl Rove, Bush's leading political advisor, four million fewer evangelical Christians voted in 2000 than expected. The mobilization of this constituency for the 2004 elections is decidedly important for Bush.

There are, above all, *three* guiding principles that characterize the neoconservative approach to foreign policy.

Military Supremacy

First is the principle of maintaining America's military supremacy, independent of potential threats and adversaries. Unparalleled military strength is considered to be a guarantee for international stability and a pre-requisite for changing the international system. This principle was clearly expressed in President Bush's important agenda-setting speech at West Point on June 1, 2002: "Competition between great nations is inevitable, but armed conflict in our world is not. More and more, civilized nations find ourselves on the same side – united by common dangers of terrorist violence and chaos. America has, and intends to keep, military strengths beyond challenge – thereby, making the destabilizing arms races of other eras pointless, and limiting rivalries to trade and other pursuits of peace."

These words reflect the view that the US needs to have military capabilities large enough to be able to deter potential competitors and regional rivals from the outset. This is meant to stop would-be rivals from aspiring to a position of dominance and challenging the US-defined international order.

If there is one state that American conservatives fear as a hegemonic rival in a key region, it is first and foremost China that they have looked to for years. Prior to September 11, there was a general consensus in the strategic community that China would represent the greatest foreign policy challenge. The question repeatedly asked was whether China would develop into a regional hegemonic power and become competitor to the US for control in Asia. Of greatest concern has been China's economic and military potential and the potential for a change in the balance of power. Pessimists feared that China could make great strides in catching up with the US; optimists stressed the huge gap that still exists. The potential for military conflict remains current due to the Taiwanese question, even if the military and technological gap is not narrowing, the power relationship in the Pacific and the Taiwan Straits remains in the US's favor, and China's intentions do not appear aggressive. A blockade of Taiwan would result in a dangerous military confrontation which could easily turn into a war. While the US has not expressly committed itself to protecting Taiwan militarily, it has clearly articulated its interest in Taiwan's security in its policy of "strategic ambiguity."

The geopolitical power conflict with China is most strongly perceived by those American conservatives who doubt that the policy of engagement will truly bring about the desired domestic changes within China and consequent changes to China's foreign policy. In the first months of the Bush administration, this suspicion found expression in the often repeated characterization of China as a "strategic rival".

After September 11, China as a potential adversary was replaced by an actually existing foe. For the time being, that brought to an end the rather heated controversy about a future military conflict with China. The issue has been pushed into the background, but the substantial conflicts in American-Chinese relations have not gone away, despite the seemingly improved atmosphere.

Whether a coincidence or not, much of what is currently taking place under the banner of the "War on Terrorism" improves the conditions for containing China – the new military presence in Central Asia, which can be expected to be maintained for a long time, the return of the US military to the Philippines, and the reestablishment of contact with the Indonesian military, which had been broken in 1999 as a result of human rights considerations. In this sense, the US is using the fight against terrorism to shore up its geopolitical position as part of a policy of military supremacy.

The Doctrine of Preventive War

The *second* guiding principle is a doctrine of military preemption against terrorist

groups and dictators who attempt to acquire weapons of mass destruction. According to the Bush administration, the US is in a long-term "war", not just against terrorist organizations, but also against terrorist states that could threaten the security of the US and its allies with weapons of mass destruction.

It is undoubtedly difficult, if not impossible, to deter non-state actors who, acting on the basis of their religious-ideological belief systems, are prepared to commit suicide. Yet, the US rejection of deterrence and containment goes even further, as President Bush clearly expressed in his address at West Point on June 1, 2002: "For much of the last century, America's defense relied on the Cold War doctrines of deterrence and containment. In some cases, those strategies still apply. But new threats also require new thinking. Deterrence – the promise of massive retaliation against nations – means nothing against shadowy terrorist networks with no nation or citizens to defend. Containment is not possible when unbalanced dictators with weapons of mass destruction can deliver those weapons or missiles or secretly provide them to terrorist allies."

The Bush Doctrine, as it has developed since September 11, extends the bounds of what is considered legitimate self-defense. The current administration actually claims the right of "anticipatory self-defense." That goes beyond preventive strikes against facilities for the production of weapons of mass destruction, which has long been a strategic option after the extent of the Iraqi armaments program became clear in the first half of the nineties. Although seldom mentioned, "counterproliferation" under Clinton also allowed for offensive options, as then Defense Minister Perry made clear in his somewhat guarded policy pronouncements regarding North Korea in 1994.

There is, however, a difference between preemption as a discrete option held in reserve and the development of an explicit doctrine of preventive defense. This could, as critics fear, become a "straightjacket", leading American decision-makers to act prematurely.

More importantly, implementation of the doctrine would mean a renunciation of the norms and institutions of the international system which the US was so involved in helping to develop in the last century. And, as Henry Kissinger recently noted, the doctrine is even revolutionary; it is a fundamental challenge to the modern international system with its reliance on the notion of sovereignty. The US is essentially claiming the right to conduct a preventive war against states that are now or could in the future present a potential security threat.

A war against Iraq with the goal of overthrowing the regime would essentially be a "preventive war", even if apologists like to use the word "preemptive". Such wars have often been fought and justified in modern times as a means of maintaining the European balance of power. But this time the goal is also to change the internal political structure of the opponent. Iraq represents a hypothetical threat with far reaching geopolitical implications. In a speech delivered August 26, Vice President Richard Cheney described a vision of a future threat from an Iraq that someday has nuclear weapons and the full spectrum of weapons of mass destruction in the following manner: "Armed with an arsenal of these weapons of terror and set a top ten percent of the world's oil reserves, Saddam Hussein could then be expected to seek domination of the entire Middle East, take control of a great portion of the world's energy supplies, directly threaten America's friends throughout the region, and subject the United States or any other nation to nuclear blackmail."

Supporting "Freedom" in the Islamic World

The *third* guiding principle involves supporting "freedom" in the Islamic world. This is also a consequence of September 11. The traditional policy vis-à-vis "friendly"

Arab states, namely the acceptance of political repression in the interest of regime stability, is being questioned more and more.

The reason why democracy and human rights play such a minor role in American Middle East policy is due to the fear that Islamist groups could come to power. Islamism, a type of political activism that entails a particular understanding of the Islamic state and politics, and which is mistakenly referred to as "Islamic fundamentalism", has represented a challenge for the foreign policy of the United States (and others states) since the Islamic revolution in Iran. The strengthening of Islamist forces was viewed as a threat to the key interests of American Middle East policy, namely the security of Israel and the stability of the client states in the Persian Gulf. With the Islamic revolution in Iran, this threat took concrete form. America's foreign policy nightmare of an Islamic state that threatens the regional order, rejects the Arab-Israeli peace process, supports terrorism, and seeks nuclear weapons appeared to become a reality in Iran. The experience with Iran has since determined the perception of Islamist movements.

In the nineties, militant Islam was considered the biggest threat to American interests in the region. It rejected the concept of "land for peace" as the basis for peace and threatened American influence in the oil states of the Persian Gulf. The destabilization of Egypt and the Gulf states was particularly regarded as a threat to the settlement of the Arab-Israeli conflict, which the Clinton administration saw a historic chance at resolving. Although the issue of political reform was not entirely ignored by the administration, the Middle East was exempted from Clinton's highly touted guiding foreign policy doctrine of enlarging the zone of democratic states.

On the issue of democratization, American Middle East experts repeatedly articulated the view that the US could not continue to carry on its traditional policy in this region. This opinion has been expressed loudly following September 11, including amongst Republicans. The fact that a significant number of the hijackers came from Saudi Arabia and Egypt, two key states for American policy, raised great concern. The internal structures of these states are viewed as a breeding ground for Islamist extremism. September 11 made it clearer than ever before that the US is an "indirect" target of Islamist terrorists because it is regarded as the protector of those regimes the terrorists want to overthrow.

One of the big challenges facing the foreign policy of America (and not just it alone) is to support the democratic opening of the autocratic regimes in the Middle East so that the social forces seeking political participation are given a chance. If the US draws back from this challenge, it will further feed the widespread and basically accurate perception in the Arab world of a hypocritical foreign policy that in principal propagates democracy, but in practice treats the Arab world as an exception.

Certainly, the US has influence due to its economic aid to Egypt and its security guarantees in the Persian Gulf. A change of course in American policy can take the form of applying pressure on governments in the region to initiate political and economic reforms. Establishing and strengthening relations with democratically orientated civic organizations is another possibility. This would require, above all, a revised, more differentiated view of Islamist movements and attempts to conduct talks with its moderate wing and their organizations.

The Bush administration appears about to go at least a little way in closing the gap of credibility between talking about freedom and democracy in the Middle East and the actual policies pursued. On the one hand, the US talks about militarily overthrowing Saddam Hussein as a means of democratizing Iraq and calls upon Palestinians to elect a new leadership. On the other hand, at the same time it does and says next to nothing about human rights

violations in states such as Egypt and Saudi Arabia and collaborates with undemocratic regimes like Syria, Yemen and Algeria in the fight against terrorism. Such contradictions undermine the credibility of American policy.

An announcement of a modest program for supporting political and economic reforms in Arab states, which is likely to include seminars for political activists, journalists, and trade unionists, has been scheduled for the Fall. Such initiatives are not likely to have much of an impact in the short-term. But the Middle East is no longer excluded from the American foreign policy goal of supporting democratic developments. The consequences of this policy shift should not be underestimated.

New Support for Foreign Aid

Foreign aid for states in the region is also being reexamined to determine how funds can be more effectively invested in order to support economic and political reforms. In general, a reevaluation of this foreign policy instrument is evident as a consequence of September 11. The end of the Cold War and the dissolution of the coalition between liberals interested in development aid and conservatives primarily interested in military aid resulted in foreign aid falling to an all time low. There was somewhat of a revival of interest in foreign aid even prior to September 11. A new coalition of liberals and religious conservatives lobbied for more money to fight AIDS in Africa and to ease the debt burden of the poorest states.

September 11 provided increased legitimacy for foreign aid, not only as a reward for those states that cooperate in the war on terrorism, but also in light of the experience in Afghanistan as an element of a sustained struggle against terrorism. Foreign aid expenditures have already been increased, with the lion's share going to support cooperating states, especially Pakistan. President Bush announced in March this year that foreign aid is to be raised by $1.7 billion in fiscal year 2004 and a further $3.3 billion in fiscal year 2005. The President has declared – and this is not unimportant – that combating poverty is part of the war on terrorism.

The Senate passed a resolution in June 2002 which expressed the intention of raising foreign aid by 25% per annum over the next five years. How much of that will actually be appropriated is uncertain. Only a portion of these funds is used in the strict sense of development aid, and, up to now, only 40 percent of foreign aid goes to the poorest states. The decision over how to use the additional resources – either as support and reward for strategically important states or for a sustained fight against poverty – will be the source of considerable debate in the administration and Congress.

In this regard, it is interesting to note that Congress, at least as far as Afghanistan is concerned, appears more willing to engage in nation-building than the still hesitant Bush administration. The Foreign Relations Committee has doubled the budget for the operation in Afghanistan. This Congressional policy seems to reflect the view that the "globalization of informal violence" (Robert O. Keohane) has made untenable the territorial realist premise of foreign policy, which differentiates between geopolitically important and geopolitically unimportant countries.

Domestic Political Constraints

It is in no way certain that September 11 has changed the domestic political context of American foreign policy to such an extent that the neoconservative network can carry out its agenda on a sustained basis. Alone the growing budget deficit sets limits on such a development. The alarmist language President Bush uses and the talk of a long-term massive threat that requires an immense increase in the military budget, are part of an effort to permanently mobilize domestic political support for an American policy of global leadership.

September 11 made possible a massive

defense build-up that the domestic political situation would have previously not allowed. For the most part, the defense program has little to do with the fight against terrorism, such as the purchase of new fighter jets and destroyers. September 11 was also a catalytic event in terms of the construction of a missile defense system. The decision to withdraw from the ABM treaty was based on the political calculation that the situation was opportune and the foreign and domestic political costs would be minimal. In foreign policy terms, President Putin's interest in integration into the West was so strong that Moscow was not expected to present a major problem. Basically, America's Russia policy did not change following September 11, rather Russia's America policy changed. The decisive factor has been Putin, who is counting on close relations with the US and Western industrial states in the interests of the economic modernization of his country.

Had it not been for September 11, the President's withdrawal from the ABM treaty would have certainly been highly controversial. Bush did not provide the Senate with any say in the matter, a move that is constitutionally problematic. Last Summer the Democrats were in the process of making missile defense a hot-button issue. But after September 11 these plans simply dissolved. Democrats in the House wanted to force a vote on the President's decision to withdraw from the treaty, but the initiative was blocked in a vote of 254 to 169. A subsequent legal challenge by 31 members of Congress is likely to remain unsuccessful.

That does not mean there will be no debate between the administration and Congress over the build-up and effectiveness of a missile defense system. The Missile Defense Agency is trying through secrecy to avoid Congressional oversight, but will not likely succeed in the long run, especially as soon as the focus turns to the costs for the layered defense system. One estimate of the Congressional Budget Office puts the price tag at $200 billion over the next two decades.

Although willing to show national unity, Congress is not willing to give up its influence over foreign policy. Approval for the President's policy has not resulted in granting a blank check for the deployment of American forces to fight against international terrorism. President Bush also failed early on in his attempt to get Congress's approval for removing all legal limitations for the next five years on military aid and arms exports for the sake of the fight against terrorism.

Congress is ready to follow the President on matters directly related to the fight against terrorism. But Congress is wary of attempts by the President to use the new threat to expand powers that are not directly related to this goal. Despite all the efforts and successes of President Bush to expand the power of the highest office – an attempt, in fact, to return to an imperial Presidency – the claims of Congress to a say in foreign policy, which have been growing since the seventies, cannot be repressed for long.

The foreign policy debate in the US is gradually returning to normal. Despite the continuing high public support for the President's foreign policy, some leading Democrats, in particular potential Presidential candidates, are daring again to criticize the President's policies.

The beginning of the debate over Iraq in Congress will provide clues about the extent to which the self-control mechanisms of the American political system continue to work. Clear, convincingly argued positions of European partners on the contested issues can only help.

Translation: *Darren Hall*

SWP
Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik
German Institute for International and Security Affairs

Ludwigkirchplatz 3–4
10719 Berlin
Telephone +49 30 880 07-0
Fax +49 30 880 07-100
www.swp-berlin.org
swp@swp-berlin.org